

Deadly shells used to stump dance hall

RICHMOND store owner Jack Brown OAM once worked at the unit near Maxwellton with 16 other armourers, maintaining and destroying thousands of bombs loaded with phosgene and mustard gas.

One of his daily tasks was to spray the phosgene bombs with ammonia to check for leaks. Leaking bombs – detected when the ammonia caused a white cloud – were removed from storage and shot with rifles to release the gas.

Mr Brown, now 85, said clouds of venting gas killed the surrounding trees.

“There was a certain amount of danger if you weren’t careful,” he said.

“They’d never used these gases in a tropical climate and they didn’t know how they should be stored.”

He said all the armourers were burned by mustard gas ‘at one time or another’.

“If you dropped a bit of mustard gas the size of a nail on the ground and walked over it, it would burn a hole in your boot the size of a 50-cent piece – you had to keep your wits about you.”

Mr Brown also volunteered to work near Proserpine testing anti-gas clothing and ointments, which were often woefully inadequate or unsuitable for the climate.

“We had one man – the whole of his back was one big blister,” Mr Brown said.

He said he helped with testing in Bowen, where

boxes similar to shipping containers were filled with mustard gas and men tested new gear by walking through the deadly fog.

“While we were cleaning it up I got a bit across my eye – I had a little glass capsule of liquid to put in it which worked all right,” he said.

When injured armourers did seek medical help, they were often met with disbelief from local doctors who were unaware of the covert chemical operations. After the war, Mr Brown and fellow armourers helped to destroy some of the mustard gas stocks by burning them – others were dumped at sea.

“The mustard gas cases would never be clean, no matter what we did with them,” Jack said.

“We’d stack the boxes about three high, spray them with high-octane fuel and then fire them.

“People picked up the old phosgene bombs and made mailboxes out of them. They even used the phosgene bombs as stumps for the dance hall.

“After the war, the Yanks stored some of their gas at Charters Towers – when they were finished they put a lot of them down the old mine shafts.”

Mr Brown said a Navy admiral sent to inspect the former weapons site said the dance hall stumps would have to be removed, but was later convinced the bombs were no longer a threat.



WWII chemical weapons armourer Jack Brown, left and above points out the building stumps

Photo: TRISH HUDSPITH